

## Holes in the Darkness

A sermon for the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, February 6<sup>th</sup>, 2011

Isaiah 58:1-14; I Corinthians 2:1-12; Matthew 5:13-20

“If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday.”

On a Sunday like this one, worn by the past week and wearied by the winter, today, I suppose, just a little will have to go a long way. A little salt to savor the blandness. A little light to put holes the darkness. Today, Jesus makes a little go a long way.

“You are the salt of the earth,” he says.

“You are the light of the world,” he tells us.

He doesn't say that we *should* be salt or that we *ought* to be light. He speaks in the indicative not the imperative. He says that we are already salt and light, images for the Law and the covenants of Israel: “Your word is a lamp unto my feet and a light to my path.”

Salt and light. Little things. Unseen qualities.

Those of you who are on salt-free diets can tell us what a big difference just a little salt makes in the way your food tastes. Some of you who have attended Easter Vigils remember how just one single candle can light up the whole sanctuary of the church.

Watching an old lamp-lighter at work on his street, the poet Robert Louis Stevenson, when he was young boy, turned and said to his nurse, “I'm watching a man put holes in the darkness.” What a sublime definition of Christian vocation.

A little light to put holes the darkness.

A little salt to savor the blandness.

Nations have fought wars over salt when it was worth more than gold because blood, sweat and tears are not comprised of gold but of salt. Roman soldiers were sometimes paid with salt. So, the word for your “salary,” or the “sale” of your house, derives from the same Latin word meaning “salt money” (*salarium*). Imagine having your salary for the past two weeks paid to you in pound of salt. By the way, anyone who is “not worth his salt” is not worth his “salary.”

Of all the images Jesus could have used to speak about us, all he said was, “You are salt. . . You are light. . . And you make all the difference in the world.”

There's a bulletin board at our YMCA which I often notice as I'm passing in the hallway. At the bottom of it there is a quotation ascribed to the ancient storyteller Aesop which says, “No act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted.”

I need to hear this because much of the time those little acts of kindness, call them salt and light, seem so wasted on a world that isn't paying attention and that seems not to care how others are treated.

“No act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted.”

And a little goes a long way.

What is small has great effect.

Compared to everything else in the vegetable soup, a pinch of salt may seem like nothing. . . until you begin eating the vegetable soup. Compared to everyone else in the world, we in the church may seem like nothing . . . until Jesus begins to name us, to give us our identity.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit . . . those who mourn . . . the meek . . . those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. . . the merciful. . . the pure in heart. . . the peacemakers. . . those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. . .” And then you wonder what the world would be like without those whom Jesus calls “blessed.”

Like Abraham of old to whom God said, “I will bless you [not just for your own sake], but I will bless you so that you will be a blessing [to others].”

Like children, we become what we are named. Call a child bad long enough, and, I suppose, he will eventually

get into big trouble. Call a child worthless long enough, and eventually she will live into the name that she's been given. Call us "blessed" and we shall become a "blessing." Call us a pinch of salt, a ray of light, and this is what we will become. But salt needs to season something. And light needs to reflect off something. If Christians benefit no one but themselves, then they are really of no use to anyone, worse than salt that has lost its taste and light that is hidden under a bowl.

"In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."

Listen. The point is not that others may see our good works and glorify *us*, or our congregation, or our family, but that *God* may be praised for the zest and light which Jesus' followers bring into a flat and darkened world.

"A city laid out on a hill cannot be hidden."

"I am the Light of the world," Jesus says. And the Light of the world shines through the lives of his followers.

"Flight into the invisible," says Bonhoeffer, "Flight into the invisible is a denial of the call. A community of Jesus which seeks to hide itself has ceased to follow him."

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I remember so many Sunday mornings years ago traveling north on Lake Shore Drive from Hyde Park to Lake View to go to church. Most of those Sundays, with the exception of Bears' game days, the Drive would be practically empty; ours seemed to be the only car on the road. I seem to remember a morning when one of the kids turned in the seat next to me and said, "Dad, it looks like we're the only ones going to church. How come we have to go to church and everybody else doesn't?"

Preacher Tom Long writes, "The church, for all of its vision, is overpowered, outnumbered, and often overlooked. The challenge is indeed formidable for a small group trying with mixed results to live out an alternative life, set down in the midst of a teeming, fast-changing culture that neither appreciates nor understands them. . . The hardest part is not in being Christian for a day, but being faithful day after day, maintaining confidence in what, for all the world, appears to be a losing cause."

Yet think of all the stories Jesus told about something insignificant in the world but full of power in the rule of God: the one pearl of great price, the one lost coin, the lost little lamb, the tiny mustard seed, the seed growing secretly.

I've seen it in you. You slip in quietly. You do your work. You don't put "CHRISTIAN" on the vanity plate of your car or wear it on your name badge. You don't look so different from anyone else. In fact, you seem to blend right in. Except for that time when you stuck up for that wayward child whom all the other teachers had given up on. Except for that time when you insisted that the company's profits should not be more important than the company's ethics. Except for that time when you told a fellow worker who was experiencing a tough time in her marriage that you were there for her to call day or night. Except for that time at the gym when you listened to a father pour out his soul for his literally lost child. Except for all those times when you were salt to savor the blandness and light to put holes the darkness.

"Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, 'Here I am.'"